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Analysing the historical background of prejudice against Australian multilinguals

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The effects of social attitudes on prejudice towards native English speakers in Australia who learn second languages is obvious, but evidence suggests that historical and academic attacks on bilingualism and the use of languages other than English may have had an impact on the way many people view plurilinguals today. There are particularly obvious periods of time when the use of languages other than English was regarded in a highly negative light in Australia.

The 20th century academic attack on child bilingualism

Childhood bilingualism was a particular target for Anglophone academics in the first half of the 20th century. The common belief was that a child who learned two languages would never learn either of them completely and would have impaired literacy skills in both languages ([Jespersen 1922](#), [Goodenough 1926](#)). Negative views on child bilingualism were reinforced by [Jensen \(1962a\)](#) who argued that bilingualism negatively impacts speech development, development of an understanding of grammar, the ability for children to think independently of others and causes emotional instability especially around family. Jensen also claims that bilingualism would cause unfaithfulness in times of war, failure of society to use its resources, and increased migration causing the presence of antisocial citizens.

Australian society had conflicting views on multilingualism in the early 20th century

An interesting comparison to make is that between the views of scholars in the early 20th century and the views of the general population. [An article](#) published in the Brisbane newspaper *The Telegraph* in 1913 gives a clue that many Australians of the time shared the views of the 1920s academics by referring to 'the common idea that diversity of languages is a bad thing.'

The monolingual nature of the Australian education system also received criticism from experts overseas. The *Western Mail* in Perth [reported](#) in 1909 that a German professor had explicitly criticised the Australian education system, arguing that it was too highly based on the English language. The article later states that 'the strong tendency in Australia is to make English the only language used, since there is little social or commercial need for any wider equipment.' School education in Australia today is still almost exclusively monolingual.

We see further reference to the monolingual nature of the Australian education system in 1921, when the [Journal of the N.S.W. Public School Teachers Federation argued](#) that

learning a foreign language at school was pointless, did not serve students in any manner and detracted from other subjects considered to be more important. The journal article refers to 'meaningless language material' and argues that 'every student should be compelled to give up a foreign language the moment his teachers consider he has reached the limit of his capacity as to assimilate it with ease.' The issue of foreign languages in schools reappeared in 1948, when *The News* in Adelaide [reported](#) that the South Australian RSL President stated at a conference that there were areas in South Australia where all school lessons were conducted in a foreign language. According to the article, an education authority responded, claiming that English was used in teaching all foreign languages and that English was spoken in all schools across the state.

It is therefore likely that students were taught negative attitudes towards foreign language use at school. The monolingual nature of Australian schools may have extended to students being punished by their teachers for speaking languages other than English at school, and potentially experiencing mistreatment from other students for their language use or background, however there is little evidence to prove this.

The World Wars created a strong anti-foreign language sentiment

In light of the evidence, it would be fair to say that the levels of government prejudice against the use of foreign languages in Australia peaked during the World Wars.

In March 1916, [the Federal war precautions regulations were amended](#) in order to outlaw telephone conversations in any language other than English. The government had the power to cut off telephones if this rule was broken. [A newspaper article from May 1917 indicates](#) that the War Protection Act stipulated that all public communication must be in plain English or be approved of by the Public Censor.

In 1940, [rules were put into place](#) stating that all telephone conversations must be conducted in English unless authority from the Postmaster-General had been given. In addition, speaking over the radio in a foreign language was forbidden, and any foreign language material intended to be broadcasted over the radio would have to be pre-recorded.

There is no doubt that this attempt to compound and degrade foreign language use in Australia during the World Wars reinforced Australians' negative attitudes towards foreign language use.

Evidence given in the last two sections suggests that racist attitudes and negative attitudes towards foreign language use were highly intertwined. It should also be noted that there are many other factors not specifically characterised by historical factors that influence prejudice against people in Australia who learn second languages.

NOTE - The term 'foreign language' is used in this article in order to be consistent with much of the primary sources used, however, this term may be seen as offensive today by modern polyglots.

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